

STARVING THE THEOLOGICAL CUCKOO

Infinite Minds: A Philosophical Cosmology by John Leslie
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Review by Huw Price

John Leslie (1766–1832) was elected to the Chair of Mathematics at Edinburgh in 1805. A native of Largo, north of Edinburgh, he was well-qualified for the position, and well-connected. He had published an acclaimed treatise on heat the previous year, was a former tutor to the Wedgwoods and to a nephew of Adam Smith, and was supported by Joseph Banks, among other scientific luminaries.

Unfortunately for Leslie, however, his unsuccessful rival for the Chair had been backed by a group of Edinburgh clerics, members of the moderate wing of the Scottish church. They sought to have his election overturned, invoking a clause in the University's statutes requiring the electors to take the advice of the Edinburgh clergy. As evidence of Leslie's unsuitability for the job, they cited this footnote from his 1804 treatise on heat, in which he refers approvingly to Hume's view of causation:

Mr Hume is the first, so far as I know, who has treated of causation in a truly philosophic manner. His *Essay on Necessary Connexion* seems a model of clear and accurate reasoning. But it was only wanted to dispel the cloud of mystery which had so long darkened that important subject. The unsophisticated sentiments of mankind are in perfect unison with the deductions of logic, and imply nothing more at bottom in the relation of cause and effect, than a *constant invariable sequence*.

Leslie's opponents objected that this view of causation challenges traditional arguments for the existence of god: "Mr Leslie, having, with Mr Hume, denied all such necessary connexion between cause and effect, ... has, of course, laid a foundation for rejecting all argument that is derived from the works of God, to prove either his being or attributes."

Mr Hume had had his own troubles with the University's electors, of course. Sixty years earlier he'd been turned down for the Chair of Moral and Pneumatical Philosophy (the latter speciality concerned souls, not gases), on grounds of his anti-religious views. Leslie now found himself charged with guilt by association.

In response, he quickly distanced himself from Hume on religious matters. Moreover, he complained, "it is painful to be called on, after the habits of intimacy in which I have lived with the most exemplary characters in both parts of the island, to

repel a direct charge of atheism.”¹ It is doubtful whether intimacy with exemplary characters would have saved Leslie’s job, however, if church politics hadn’t come to his aid. The pious wing of the Scottish church—keen to appear liberal, apparently, and disliking Leslie’s clerical opponents more than they disliked his own views—came to his defence. They supported Leslie at the church synod, and the move to challenge his election was defeated narrowly, after a two-day debate.

How much has changed since 1805? In one sense, obviously, a great deal. In Scotland and similarly fortunate nations, it is easier to imagine a scientific appointment being challenged on the grounds that there is too much rather than too little religion in evidence in the candidate’s academic work. Whatever scientists do in their spare time, religion has been almost entirely banished from the main game. It would be nice to report that Leslie’s implied contrast between atheism and exemplary character was also a relic of another world, but this is much more doubtful. Still, some victories for the Hume side, these past two centuries.

Within philosophy, however, there has been less progress, as the work of the present John Leslie illustrates. This John Leslie is a Canadian philosopher, known for interesting work on so-called anthropic arguments in contemporary cosmology (arguments which try to derive novel conclusions about the nature of the universe from the fact that it contains observers like us). But his recent book *Infinite Minds: A Philosophical Cosmology* is as much a theological as a philosophical or scientific work. It begins with the traditional problem of evil: how can we account for the existence of pain and suffering, in a world supposedly created by a benevolent god? And it ends with a popular modern version of the argument from design. Leslie maintains that there is evidence for an intelligent creator in the ‘fine-tuning’ of various physical constants apparently needed to produce a universe suitable for life.

What lies between these arguments is not Christian theology in any strict sense—Leslie is no mere monotheist, for one thing—but it is certainly theology. Leslie proposes that to exist is to be thought by a divine or infinite mind, of which there are probably an infinite number. Such minds think everything worth thinking, which includes some pain and suffering. As to why such divine minds themselves exist, Leslie suggests that it is a kind of platonic moral requirement that they do so. Goodness has creative force.

For me, as a resolutely secular philosopher of science, the task of reviewing the book thus presented a practical dilemma. In one sense, it would have been easy enough to play the game that philosophers play, engaging with Leslie’s arguments as atheist to his theist. But to do that full-voice, as my considered response to the book, seemed a

¹ Here even the implied link between theism and good character distances Leslie from Hume. On his deathbed, Hume shocked Boswell by remarking that “when he heard a man was religious, he concluded he was a rascal, though he had known some instances of very good men being religious.”

kind of bad faith. It would have been a concession of intellectual respectability to a viewpoint I regard as off the map of serious philosophical and scientific enquiry, as well as positively harmful in its less theoretical contemporary manifestations (where ‘god is the problem’, as Salman Rushdie put it recently.)

Put aside, for now, the issue about the harm caused by religion in contemporary life. The remaining concern can be hard to see, easily obscured by the fact the theological framework in question is so familiar, so ordinary, so unthreatening, at least in its de-natured modern philosophical forms. Like almost all my professional colleagues, after all, I grew up in a culture in which it was, and is, almost impossible for a thoughtful child not to feel the pull of certain theological questions—“Does god exist?”, “Does the world have a creator?”, and the like. The way we teach philosophy ensures that if one of our students had somehow escaped these issues as a child, she would certainly be subjected to them in introductory philosophy courses. There, she would find them treated as legitimate and meaningful questions, fit topics on which to practice philosophical skills.

Of course, it is easy to avoid many of the more specific concerns of traditional Christian theology. Did the serpent really speak in the Garden of Eden, for example? (I’m told that this issue still divides certain sects of the Dutch reformed church.) But in their big, abstract, de-natured contemporary forms—the forms in which they feature in Leslie’s book, among other things—these issues can seem to be simply *there*.

But it’s easy to be misled by familiarity. The concerns in question are easily visible if we think of analogous examples further from home, geographically, ideologically or historically. Think of the talking snake, after all, or “creation science”. For my part, I’m attracted by the thought of a future in which the question whether god exists seems just as silly. I’m suspicious of the whole theological game, even in its de-natured forms; and not impressed by the argument that these must be serious questions, because we get undergraduates to think about them.

Hence my dilemma. While it seemed possible, even tempting, to engage with Leslie on particular philosophical points, taking theology at face value would have seemed a kind of moral defeat: feeding an ancient intellectual cuckoo that would be better simply starved. The right course seemed to be to ignore its demands on my attention, and walk away.

How then to write about the book? Could I perhaps say something about why, in my view, we should regard Leslie’s approach as off the intellectual map—why we should walk away from theological debate? Or does it all come down to intellectual fashion, to the fact that I’m simply cooler than Leslie, an earlier adopter of a discourse in which theology has ceased to matter?

Thinking about these questions in Edinburgh, I thought of Hume (a true early adopter) as the obvious source of what needed to be said. In Hume, in fact, we can

find at least two versions of what might be said, one ultimately more durable than the other. As I'll explain, the second and more durable version turns out to have particular relevance to Leslie's project. We can also find in Hume a characteristically forceful opinion about why the issue matters—more on that later.

The first possibility is that we dismiss theology on the grounds that it is simply meaningless, according to some acceptable criterion for distinguishing sense from nonsense, in matters academic. This idea has its heyday in the mid-twentieth century, but is often thought to originate in Hume. Hume appears to say that on the side of sense lies logical and mathematical reasoning, and empirical investigation. All else—much traditional metaphysics, as well as theology—is meaningless babble. In a famous passage from *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume describes the practical application of this criterion:

When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance, let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames, for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.

Two things happened to this passage in the mid-twentieth century. First, the allusion to book-burning acquired new and terrifying associations. (For Hume's original readers, it seems to have been a safely distant classical reference to the sacking of the library at Alexandria.) Second, and more important for our present purposes, the idea that no factual statement was meaningful unless its significance could be cashed out in observational terms fell out of favour in philosophy, after a period of unprecedented popularity. Under the label 'verificationism', this doctrine was a centrepiece of logical positivism, a scientifically-minded philosophy which flourished in Vienna between the wars. (Its leading English-speaking proponent was A J Ayer.) Logical positivism marked a kind of high tide for empiricism in philosophy, and the demise of verificationism was but one aspect of a wide-ranging (and on-going) reassessment of empiricism, in post-war Anglo-American philosophy.

True, verificationism remains influential and useful as a kind of pocket philosophy for practising scientists, where its effect is to focus the minds of theorists on the question as to how their proposals might be tested. But in philosophy of science, almost nobody thinks of the choice between scientific theories as a straightforwardly observational matter. The choice between theories, even in science, is widely seen as a much messier, more pragmatic matter than traditional empiricism liked to believe.

Regrettably, then, there doesn't seem to be any simple way of distinguishing sense from nonsense, and hence of dismissing theology on the grounds that it is

nonsense. Theology may become meaningless to us as we walk away from it, but we can't rule it nonsensical in advance, as justification for walking away. If there is a justification, it seems likely to be pragmatic. Theology must be shown to be a game it isn't useful to play.

But pragmatism cuts both ways. As William James had noted with approval at the turn of the century, pragmatism may preserve a place for religion, in the face of science. If we should believe what it is pragmatically useful to believe, and it is useful to believe in god, then we should believe in god. In fact, James goes even further: if our belief in god works, that makes it true. This can sound like the view that faith has creative or ontological power, but it is important to keep in mind that pragmatism has lowered the bar. Success makes for truth in the only sense of truth the pragmatist allows; but it does not make for truth in the old metaphysical sense. (In *The Will to Believe* James compares the self-vindicating role of faith to the benefits of resolve in romantic endeavours: "How many women's hearts are vanquished by the mere sanguine insistence of some man that they must love him!" His own experience seems to have confirmed this opinion only negatively, in that he was a famously indecisive man, and unlucky in love.)

However, the path that pragmatism thus leaves open for religion in the light of science requires that religion be doing a different job from science. If religion is a competitor to science, a rival strategy in the same game, the success of science implies the (comparative) failure of religion: faith doesn't work, compared to science. To the extent that religion remains in the same game as science, in other words, James's pragmatic defence won't save it.

This brings me to the second and more durable way of appealing to Hume, to dismiss Leslie's kind of theology. One of Hume's great contributions to philosophy is to turn the scientific spotlight on our own habits of thought—to ask the genealogical question about how, and why, we come to talk of various things: external objects, values, gods, causes, and so on. This gives us a way of comparing religion and science, and the upshot, as we'll see, is bad news for Leslie's kind of theology.

Initially, Hume's spotlight may seem promising for a pragmatic defence of religious belief, based on the idea that theism is a different game from science. After all, implicit in the genealogical question, and explicit in Hume's answers to it, is the recognition that the genetic story may be different in each case. Different kinds of talk may have different origins, and do different jobs. However, everything depends on what the genetic account of religion turns out to be—on whether it can justly claim to be orthogonal to science.

Another of Hume's key ideas is that we are prone to "project" our ideas and values onto the world, and hence see it as full of seemingly objective properties that really have their origin in us. As Hume puts it, the mind "has a productive faculty, and

gilding or staining all natural objects with the colours, borrowed from internal sentiment, raises in a manner a new creation.” But the upshot of this realisation differs greatly from case to case.

On the one hand, consider theism. Hume suggests that theism originates in primitive society when—seeking to make sense of a perilous and often unpredictable world—our ancestors see it as peopled by intelligent agents, built in their own image. The idea that the world has such an anthropomorphic causal structure then turns out to be in conflict with science. Putting it crudely, science shows that the theory that causes tend to be anthropomorphic is just a very bad theory. (Hume may also have thought that causation itself is anthropomorphic, and in tension with science, which shows there is nothing but regularities; but we can leave this complexity aside.)

On the other hand, consider judgements of right and wrong, good and bad. Hume thinks that these, too, are projections of our own likes and dislikes. In that sense, morality has no objective basis in the world. But it is not clear that appreciating this should make us less inclined to moralise (as Nietzsche, famously, was later to maintain). Perhaps moralising is like falling in love, in that appreciating its biological basis need make us no less inclined to do it. (“Even logical positivists are capable of love”, as A J Ayer put it, and—having what William James evidently lacked—managed to confirm with some notoriety.)

Unlike much religion, at any rate, morality isn’t making causal claims about how the world works. So it isn’t undermined by science’s discovery that the world works some other way. Theism’s vulnerability turns on the particular job that it claims to do—on the fact that it is bad science, in effect—not simply on its anthropocentric origins.

This contrast between religion and morality might break down in one of two ways. First, it is easy to imagine a religious or spiritual practice that explicitly distances itself from the kind of causal claims that bring it into conflict with science. Even if all religions originate as proto-science, some of them might surely mutate into something different. The bad science objection then has no bite, and religion seems on a par with morality, from a Humean point of view. (In practice, of course, this is a very common way of trying to save a space for religion, in the light of science.)

Two remarks about this possibility. First, the pragmatic question remains open. It is one thing to show that such a practice is possible, another to maintain that it is good for us. (More on this in a moment.) Second, and more relevant to the present context, this “religion is not science” option simply isn’t open to Leslie. Leslie’s pantheistic picture is supposed to answer some of the big scientific questions: What is the universe like, and why? So although the contrast between religion and morality might break down in a way that saved religion, it can’t do so in a way that saves Leslie’s project. (Quite the contrary, in fact, as we’re about to see.)

I said that the contrast between religion and morality might break down in one of two ways. The less obvious possibility, which dooms morality rather than saving religion, is to give moral notions a role that puts them in conflict with science. But this is what Leslie does! For Leslie, moral requirements are the ultimate explanation of the existence of anything (including divine minds). Such things exist because there is a moral requirement that they do so.

Given a Humean account of the genealogy of morals, this would be simply absurd. Leslie knows this, of course, and in what for me are some of the most disappointing passages in the book, tries to dismiss the kind of accounts of moral talk which descend from Hume. “At this point”, Leslie says, “let us make no effort to refute various anti-objectivist theories [of good and bad] dreamt up by philosophers.”²

Let us say simply that such theories fail to capture the ordinary senses of words such as ‘good’, ‘bad’, and ‘ethically demanded’. The ordinary view is that various things are ... ‘made needful or required’, not by human likes and dislikes only ... but through their own natures. It is a view arrived at for the unmysterious reason that people like to think they are absolutely right in favouring this or that while their benighted opponents are absolutely wrong. (167)

The ideas of good and bad were formed by people who wanted to picture various things they favoured as absolutely called for, so that their opponents truly were benighted folk instead of just folk who favoured different things. (170)

Ironically, these remarks could almost be Humean explanations of how people come to *think* of good and bad as objective aspects of reality (“rais[ing] in a manner a new creation”)—and reminders of the risks of taking this too far, of thinking of our own preferences as guides to absolute goods. For Leslie, however, the two uses of “benighted” here must be unironic. Accordingly, these passages seem to me to display not only a remarkable disregard for the important philosophical approach to morality that stems from Hume, but also considerable insensitivity to the realities of deep moral differences.

Let’s sum up. We’ve allowed that pragmatism saves a place for religion in the face of science, but only if religion is not in the same game as science. Otherwise, pragmatism doesn’t save it from the charge that it is simply bad science. What’s wrong with Leslie’s project is simply that he’s offering us very bad science. And the best way

² Here Leslie calls our attention to an earlier work in which, he says, he “goes so far as to suggest that defending [such theories] would add to the dangers now facing humankind *if* anybody listened to philosophers.”

to see that it is bad science is to reflect in a Humean spirit on the anthropocentric origins of its key concepts, of gods and goodness.

We've also noted that even when religion isn't in the same game as science, it is only saved by pragmatism if it turns out to be useful. So, finally, to the question I've been deferring. Is religion good for us? Does it improve our lives? This is a huge issue, of course, and an urgent one. (As Simon Schama puts it, in an article published as I was finishing this review, on the first anniversary of September 11, "the need to break clear from the suffocation of reverent togetherness is not just a matter of philosophical self-respect.") And Hume came this way, too, of course. Let's close with his view of the matter—his pragmatic reason for welcoming a future, sadly still to come, in which Leslie's project seems an absurd relic of a less enlightened age.

How happens it then, ... if vulgar superstition be so salutary to society, that all history abounds so much with accounts of its pernicious consequences on public affairs? Factions, civil wars, persecutions, subversions of government, oppression, slavery; these are the dismal consequences which always attend its prevalency over the minds of men. If the religious spirit be ever mentioned in any historical narration, we are sure to meet afterwards with a detail of the miseries which attend it. And no period of time can be happier or more prosperous, than those in which it is never regarded or heard of. (*Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, XII)

Postscript

This review was commissioned for *The London Review of Books*. However, it was rejected by the commissioning editor, John Sturrock, who found it unacceptably dismissive—a failure to take the book “seriously”, as he put it. At the time, this seemed an unexpected confirmation of the very thing my review was attacking, viz., the continuing respectability of Leslie's brand of scientific theology. Apparently the subject remained *so* respectable, at least in the eyes of this particular editor, that the view that it did not deserve such a status could not be regarded as a serious response to the book. (Mr Sturrock didn't respond to a request that he reconsider.)

My treatment of Leslie's project was certainly disrespectful, but of course that was the point. Our collective view of what counts as a worthwhile intellectual endeavour changes over time. At a certain point, when a topic nears the margins, the view that it should be pushed beyond them begins to be taken seriously. That view is inevitably a recommendation for disrespect—a disrespect required by self-respect.

Theology has been moving in that direction for a long time. Eventually it will be off the map, and even *The London Review of Books* will no more take seriously a work such as Leslie's than they would now review a defence of “creation science”, or

astrology. Until then, it remains important to remind ourselves that we can keep moving in that direction. At present, then, a serious intellectual response to this kind of book is to remind ourselves that we don't need to take it seriously, in the sense that the editor had in mind. We don't need to keep feeding the theological cuckoo. We are entitled simply to walk away.³

³ Belated thanks to several people who gave me comments on this piece in 2002, including Rae Langton, Richard Holton, Peter Kail and Jeanne Peijnenberg; and especially to John Wright, who alerted to me the existence and tribulations of the other John Leslie.